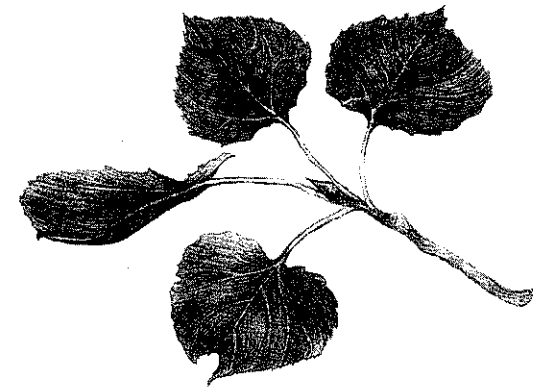


## DEFINITION

### Tracing a Boundary



## THE METHOD

As a rule, when we hear the word **DEFINITION**, we immediately think of a dictionary. In that helpful storehouse—a writer's best friend—we find the literal and specific meaning (or meanings) of a word. The dictionary supplies this information concisely: in a sentence, in a phrase, or even in a synonym—a single word that means the same thing (“**narrative** [năr-e-tīv] n. 1: story...”).

Stating such a definition is often a good way to begin an essay when basic terms may be in doubt. A short definition can clarify your subject to your reader, and perhaps help you to limit what you have to say. If, for instance, you are going to discuss a demolition derby, explaining such a spectacle to readers who may never have seen one, you might offer at the outset a short definition of *demolition derby*, your subject and your key term.

In constructing a short definition, the usual procedure is to state the general class to which the subject belongs and then add any particular features that distinguish it. You could say: “A demolition derby is a contest”—that is its general class—“in which drivers ram old cars into one another until only one car is left running.” Short definitions may

be useful at any moment in an essay, whenever you introduce a technical term that readers may not know.

When a term is really central to your essay and likely to be misunderstood, a *stipulative definition* may be helpful. This fuller explanation stipulates, or specifies, the particular way you are using a term. The paragraph on page 345, defining *TV addiction*, could be a stipulative definition in an essay on the causes and cures of the addiction.

In this chapter, we are mainly concerned with *extended definition*, a kind of expository writing that relies on a variety of other methods. Suppose you wanted to write an essay to make clear what *poetry* means. You would specify its elements—rhythm, IMAGES, and so on—by using DIVISION OR ANALYSIS. You'd probably provide EXAMPLES of each element. You might COMPARE AND CONTRAST poetry with prose. You might discuss the EFFECT of poetry on the reader. (Emily Dickinson, a poet herself, once stated the effect that reading a poem had on her: "I feel as if the top of my head were taken off.") In fact, extended definition, unlike other methods of writing discussed in this book, is perhaps less a method in itself than the application of a variety of methods to clarify a purpose. Like DESCRIPTION, extended definition tries to *show* a reader its subject. It does so by establishing boundaries, for its writer tries to differentiate a subject from anything that might be confused with it.

When Gloria Naylor, in her essay in this chapter, seeks to define the freighted word *nigger*, she recalls her experiences of the word as an African American, recounting exactly what she heard in varying situations. Extended definition examines the nature of the subject, carefully summing up its chief characteristics and drawing boundaries around it, striving to answer the question "What makes this what it is, not something else?"

An extended definition can define a word (like *nigger*), a thing (a laser beam), a concept (TV addiction), or a general phenomenon (the popularity of the demolition derby). Unlike a sentence definition, or any you would find in a standard dictionary, an extended definition takes room: at least a paragraph, often an entire essay. In having many methods of writing at your disposal, you have ample freedom and wide latitude.

Outside an English course, how is this method of writing used? In a newspaper feature, a sportswriter defines what makes a *great team* great. In a journal article, a physician defines the nature of a previously unknown syndrome or disease. In a written opinion, a judge defines not only a word but a concept, *obscenity*. In a book review, a critic defines a newly prevalent kind of poem. In a letter to a younger brother or sister contemplating college, a student might define a *gut course* and how to recognize one.

Unlike a definition in a dictionary that sets forth the literal meaning of a word in an unimpassioned manner, some definitions imply

biases. In defining *patron* to the earl of Chesterfield, who had tried to befriend him after ignoring his petitions for aid during his years of grinding poverty, Samuel Johnson wrote scornfully: "Is not a Patron, my Lord, one who looks with unconcern on a man struggling for life in the water, and, when he has reached the ground, encumbers him with help?" IRONY, a FIGURE OF SPEECH (metaphor), and a short definition have rarely been wielded with such crushing power. (*Encumbers*, by the way, is a wonderfully physical word in its context: It means "to burden with dead weight.")

## THE PROCESS

### Discovery of Meanings

The purpose of almost any extended definition is to explore a topic in its full complexity, to explain its meaning or sometimes to argue for (or against) a particular meaning. To discover this complexity, you may find it useful to ask yourself a series of questions. These questions may be applied both to individual subjects, such as a basketball superstar or a comet, and to collective subjects: institutions (like the American family, a typical savings bank, a university, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints) and organizations (IBM, the Mafia, a heavy-metal band, a Little League baseball team). To illustrate how the questions might work, at least in one instance, let's say you plan to write a paper defining *sexism*.<sup>1</sup>

1. *Is this subject unique, or are there others of its kind? If it resembles others, in what ways? How is it different?* As you can see, these last two questions invite you to compare and contrast. Applied to the concept of sexism, these questions might prompt you to compare sexism with one or two other -isms, such as racism or ageism. Or they might remind you that sexists can be both women and men, leading you to note the differences.
2. *In what different forms does it occur, while keeping its own identity?* Specific examples might occur to you: your Uncle George, who won't hire any "damned females" in his auto repair shop, or a girlfriend who is nastily suspicious of all men. Each form—Uncle George and the girlfriend—might rate a description.

<sup>1</sup> The six questions that follow are freely adapted from those first stated by Richard E. Young, Alton L. Becker, and Kenneth L. Pike, who have applied insights from psychology and linguistics to the writing process. Their procedure for generating ideas and discovering information is called *tagmemics*. To investigate subjects in greater depth, their own six questions may be used in nine possible combinations, as they explain in detail in *Rhetoric: Discovery and Change* (New York: Harcourt, 1970).

3. *When and where do we find it? Under what circumstances and in what situations?* Well, where have you been lately? At any parties where sexism reared its ugly head? In any classroom discussions? Consider other areas of your experience: Did you encounter any sexists while holding a part-time summer job?
4. *What is it at the present moment?* Perhaps you might make the point that sexism was once considered an exclusively male preserve but is now an attribute of women as well. Or you could observe that many men have gone underground with their sexism, refraining from expressing it blatantly while still harboring negative attitudes about women. In either case, you might care to draw examples from life.
5. *What does it do? What are its functions and activities?* Sexists stereotype and sometimes act to exclude or oppress people of the opposite sex. These questions might also invite you to reply with a **PROCESS ANALYSIS**: You might show, for instance, how a sexist man you know, a personnel director who determines pay scales, systematically eliminates women from better-paying jobs.
6. *How is it put together? What parts make it up? What holds these parts together?* You could apply analysis to the various beliefs and assumptions that, all together, make up sexism. This question might work well in writing about an organization: the personnel director's company, for instance, with its unfair hiring and promotion policies.

Not all these questions will fit every subject under the sun, and some may lead nowhere, but you will usually find them well worth asking. They can make you aware of points to notice, remind you of facts you already know. They can also suggest interesting points you need to find out more about.

### Methods of Development

The preceding questions will give you a good start on using whatever method or methods of writing can best answer the overall question "What is the nature of this subject?" You will probably find yourself making use of much that you have learned earlier from this book. A short definition like the one for *demolition derby* on page 339 may be a good start for your essay, especially if you think your readers need a quick grounding in the subject or in your view of it. (But feel no duty to place a dictionaryish definition in the **INTRODUCTION** of every essay you write: The device is overused.) In explaining a demolition derby, if your readers already have at least a vague idea of the meaning of the term and need no short, formal definition of it, you could open your extended definition by

NARRATING the events at a typical demolition derby, starting with a description of the lineup of old beat-up vehicles:

One hundred worthless cars—everything from a 1960 Cadillac to a Dodge Dart to a recently wrecked Thunderbird, their glass removed, their radiators leaking—assemble on a racetrack or an open field. Their drivers, wearing crash helmets, buckle themselves into their seats, some pulling at beer cans to soften the blows to come.

You could proceed by example, listing demolition derbies you have known ("The great destruction of 184 vehicles took place at the Orleans County Fair in Barton, Vermont, in the summer of '97..."). If you have enough examples, you could **CLASSIFY** them; or perhaps you could analyze a demolition derby, dividing it into its components of cars, drivers, judges, first-aid squad, and spectators, and discussing each. You could compare and contrast a demolition derby with that amusement park ride known as Bumper Cars or Dodge-'ems, in which small cars with rubber bumpers bash one another head-on, but (unlike cars in the derby) harmlessly. A process analysis of a demolition derby might help your readers understand the nature of the spectacle: how in round after round, cars are eliminated until one remains. You could ask "What causes the owners of old cars to want to smash them?" or "What causes people to watch the destruction?" or "What are the consequences?" To answer such questions in an essay, you would apply the method of **CAUSE AND EFFECT**.

### Thesis

Opening up your subject with questions and developing it with various methods are good ways to see what your subject has to offer, but they can also leave you with a welter of ideas and a blurred focus. As in description, when all your details build to a dominant impression, so in definition you want to center all your thoughts and evidence about the subject on a single controlling idea, a **THESIS**. It's not essential to state this idea in a **THESIS SENTENCE**, although doing so can be a service to your readers. What is essential is that the idea govern.

Here, from the essays in this chapter, are two thesis sentences. Notice how each focuses the broad subject to an assertion about the subject, and how we can detect the author's bias toward the subject.

The word *chink* may have been created to harm, ridicule, and humiliate, but for us [Chinese Americans] it may have done the exact opposite. (Christine Leong, "Being a Chink")

We should give [the murder of the Jews] its true designation and not hide it behind polite, erudite terms [such as *holocaust*] created out of classical words. (Bruno Bettelheim, "The Holocaust")

## Evidence

Writing an extended definition, you are like a mapmaker charting a territory, taking in some of what lies within the boundaries and ignoring what lies outside. The boundaries, of course, may be wide; and for this reason, the writing of an extended definition sometimes tempts a writer to sweep across a continent airily and to soar off into abstract clouds. Like any other method of expository writing, though, definition will work only for the writer who remembers the world of the senses and supports every generalization with concrete evidence.

There may be no finer illustration of the perils of definition than the scene, in Charles Dickens's novel *Hard Times*, of the grim schoolroom of a teacher named Gradgrind, who insists on facts but who completely ignores living realities. When a girl whose father is a horse trainer is unable to define a horse, Gradgrind blames her for not knowing what a horse is; and he praises the definition of a horse supplied by a pet pupil: "Quadruped. Graminivorous. Forty teeth, namely twenty-four grinders, four eye-teeth, and twelve incisive. Sheds coat in the spring; in marshy countries, sheds hoofs, too. Hoofs hard, but requiring to be shod with iron. Age known by marks in mouth." To anyone who didn't already know what a horse is, this enumeration of facts would prove of little help. In writing an extended definition, never lose sight of the reality you are attempting to bound, even if its frontiers are as inclusive as those of *psychological burnout* or *human rights*. Give your reader examples, narrate an illustrative story, bring in specific description—in whatever method you use, keep coming down to earth. Without your eyes on the world, you will define no reality. You might define *animal husbandry* till the cows come home and never make clear what it means.

## CHECKLIST FOR REVISING A DEFINITION

- ✓ **MEANINGS.** Have you explored your subject fully, turning up both its obvious and its not-so-obvious meanings?
- ✓ **METHODS OF DEVELOPMENT.** Have you used an appropriate range of other methods to develop your subject?
- ✓ **THESIS.** Have you focused your definition and kept within that focus, drawing clear boundaries around your subject?
- ✓ **EVIDENCE.** Is your definition specific? Do examples, anecdotes, and concrete details both pin the subject down and make it vivid for readers?

DEFINITION IN A PARAGRAPH:  
TWO ILLUSTRATIONS

## Using Definition to Write About Television

The paragraph below SUMMARIZES the definition of TV *addiction* given in Marie Winn's essay on pages 361–63. The paragraph was written for *The Brief Bedford Reader* as an example of definition, but its opening question suggests a broader use than just illustration: In a full essay on the causes and cures of the addiction, the paragraph could serve as a stipulative definition of the essay's key term.

Who is addicted to TV? According to Marie Winn, author of *The Plug-in Drug: Television, Children, and the Family*, TV addicts are similar to drug or alcohol addicts: They seek a more pleasurable experience than they can get from normal life; they depend on the source of this pleasure; and their lives are damaged by their dependency. TV addicts, says Winn, use TV to screen out the real world of feelings, worries, demands. They watch compulsively—four, five, even six hours on a work day. And they reject (usually passively, sometimes actively) interaction with family or friends, diverting or productive work at hobbies or chores, and chances for change and growth.

Definition of TV addiction

Comparison with drug alcohol addiction

Analysis of TV addiction characteristics

## Using Definition in an Academic Discipline

This paragraph from a biology textbook defines a term, *homology*, that is useful in explaining the evolution of different species from a common ancestor (the topic at this point in the textbook). The paragraph provides a brief definition, a more extensive one, and finally examples of the concept.

When the character traits found in any two species owe their resemblance to a common ancestry, taxonomists say the states are *homologous*, or are *homologues* of each other. *Homology* is defined as correspondence between two structures due to inheritance from a common ancestor. Homologous structures can be identical in appearance and can even be based on identical genes. However, such structures can diverge until they become very different in both appearance and function. Nevertheless, homologous structures usually retain certain basic features that betray a common ancestry. Consider the forelimbs of vertebrates. It is easy to make a detailed, bone-by-bone, muscle-by-muscle comparison of the forearm of a person and a monkey and to conclude that the forearms, as well as the various parts of the forearm, are

Definition of homology and related words

Short definition

Refined definition

Examples:

Similar appearance, function, and structure

homologous. The forelimb of a dog, however, shows marked differences from those of primates in both appearance and function. The forelimb is used for locomotion by dogs but for grasping and manipulation by people and monkeys. Even so, all of the bones can still be matched. The wing of a bird and the flipper of a seal are even more different from each other or from the human forearm, yet they too are constructed around bones that can be matched on a nearly perfect one-to-one basis.

—William K. Purves and Gordon H. Orians,  
*Life: The Science of Biology*

*Dissimilar appearance  
and function, but similar  
structure*

### DEFINITION ELSEWHERE IN THE BRIEF BEDFORD READER

Many of the essays in this book include at least a short definition of some key term. In the selections listed below, the authors mix extended definition with the other methods they use to achieve their purposes.

#### PART ONE

Barbara Lazear Ascher, "On Compassion"  
Anna Quindlen, "Homeless"  
Nancy Mairs, "Disability"  
Judy Brady, "I Want a Wife"  
William Lutz, "The World of Doublespeak"  
Scott Russell Sanders, "Homeplace"

#### PART TWO

Joan Didion, "In Bed"  
Martin Luther King, Jr., "I Have a Dream"

## CASE STUDY Using Definition

Susan Iessi was a freshman at the State University of New York at New Paltz when she volunteered to become a member of Hall Government, a dormitory association dedicated to student support. Discovering that many dorm residents, especially other freshmen, were unclear about the work of Hall Government, Iessi wrote the following statement.

Iessi's main goal of specifying Hall Government's purposes and responsibilities drew her into defining the mission of the association. After she drafted the statement, she showed it to other members. When one reader suggested that she explain the connections between Hall Government and other campus organizations, Iessi agreed: The change would clarify the boundaries of Hall Government. Iessi's final draft appears below.

### The Mission of Hall Government

Hall Government consists of students who volunteer to provide the residents of their dormitory with social and emotional support. Hall Government creates opportunities for residents to meet other residents and build a network of friends through structured discussions, social events, and educational programs. It also mediates in situations such as conflicts between students and teachers or between roommates. The members of Hall Government believe that their support will encourage residents to provide support for each other as well, building a community in which students may learn and thrive during their college years.

Each dormitory's Hall Government functions independently. The groups have no formal relationship with the campus-wide elected student government but are sponsored and funded by the Residence Hall Student Association.

## GLORIA NAYLOR

GLORIA NAYLOR describes herself as "just a girl from Queens who can turn a sentence," but she is well known for bringing African American women vividly within the fold of American literature. She was born in 1950 in New York City and served for some years as a missionary for the Jehovah's Witnesses, working "for better world conditions." While in college, she made her living as a telephone operator. She graduated from Brooklyn College in 1981 and received an MA in African American literature from Yale University in 1983. While teaching at several universities and publishing numerous stories and essays, Naylor has written five interconnected novels: *The Women of Brewster Place* (1982), *Linden Hills* (1985), *Mama Day* (1988), *Bailey's Cafe* (1992), and *The Men of Brewster Place* (1998). *The Women of Brewster Place* won the American Book Award for best first novel, and Naylor has also received fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts and the Guggenheim Foundation. She lives in New York City.

### *The Meanings of a Word*

When she was in third grade, Naylor was stung by a word that seemed new. Only later did she realize that she'd been hearing the word all her life, but in an entirely different context. In "The Meanings of a Word," she uses definition to explore the varying meanings that context creates. The essay first appeared in the *New York Times* in 1986.

The essay following this one, Christine Leong's "Being a Chink," responds directly to Naylor and extends her point about context and meaning.

Language is the subject. It is the written form with which I've managed to keep the wolf away from the door and, in diaries, to keep my sanity. In spite of this, I consider the written word inferior to the spoken, and much of the frustration experienced by novelists is the awareness that whatever we manage to capture in even the most transcendent passages falls far short of the richness of life. Dialogue achieves its power in the dynamics of a fleeting moment of sight, sound, smell, and touch.

I'm not going to enter the debate here about whether it is language that shapes reality or vice versa. That battle is doomed to be waged whenever we seek intermittent reprieve from the chicken and egg dispute. I will simply take the position that the spoken word, like the written word, amounts to a non-sensical arrangement of sounds or letters without a consensus that assigns "meaning." And building from the meanings of what we hear, we order reality. Words themselves are innocuous; it is the consensus that gives them true power.

I remember the first time I heard the word *nigger*. In my third-grade class, our math tests were being passed down the rows, and as I handed the papers to a little boy in back of me, I remarked that once again he had received a much lower mark than I did. He snatched his test from me and spit out that word. Had he called me a nymphomaniac or a necrophiliac, I couldn't have been more puzzled. I didn't know what a nigger was, but I knew that whatever it meant, it was something he shouldn't have called me. This was verified when I raised my hand, and in a loud voice repeated what he had said and watched the teacher scold him for using a "bad" word. I was later to go home and ask the inevitable question that every black parent must face—"Mommy, what does *nigger* mean?"

And what exactly did it mean? Thinking back, I realize that this could not have been the first time the word was used in my presence. I was part of a large extended family that had migrated from the rural South after World War II and formed a close-knit network that gravitated around my maternal grandparents. Their ground-floor apartment in one of the buildings they owned in Harlem was a weekend mecca for my immediate family, along with countless aunts, uncles, and cousins who brought along assorted friends. It was a bustling and open house with assorted neighbors and tenants popping in and out to exchange bits of gossip, pick up an old quarrel, or referee the ongoing checkers game in which my grandmother cheated shamelessly. They were all there to let down their hair and put up their feet after a week of labor in the factories, laundries, and shipyards of New York.

Amid the clamor, which could reach deafening proportions—two or three conversations going on simultaneously, punctuated by the sound of a baby's crying somewhere in the back rooms or out on the street—there was still a rigid set of rules about what was said and how. Older children were sent out of the living room when it was time to get into the juicy details about "you-know-who" up on the third floor who had gone and gotten herself "p-r-e-g-n-a-n-t!" But my parents, knowing that I could spell well beyond my years, always demanded that I follow the others out to play. Beyond sexual misconduct and death, everything else was considered harmless for our young ears. And so among the anecdotes of the triumphs and disappointments in the various workings of their lives, the word *nigger* was used in my presence, but it was set within contexts and inflections that caused it to register in my mind as something else.

In the singular, the word was always applied to a man who had distinguished himself in some situation that brought their approval for his strength, intelligence, or drive:

"Did Johnny *really* do that?"

"I'm telling you, that nigger pulled in \$6,000 of overtime last year. Said he got enough for a down payment on a house."

When used with a possessive adjective by a woman—"my nigger"—it became a term of endearment for her husband or boyfriend. But it could be more than just a term applied to a man. In their mouths it became the pure essence of manhood—a disembodied force that channeled their past history of struggle and present survival against the odds into a victorious statement of being: "Yeah, that old foreman found out quick enough—you don't mess with a nigger."

In the plural, it became a description of some group within the community that had overstepped the bounds of decency as my family defined it. Parents who neglected their children, a drunken couple who fought in public, people who simply refused to look for work, those with excessively dirty mouths or unkempt households were all "trifling niggers." This particular circle could forgive hard times, unemployment, the occasional bout of depression—they had gone through all of that themselves—but the unforgivable sin was a lack of self-respect.

A woman could never be a "nigger" in the singular, with its connotation of confirming worth. The noun *girl* was its closest equivalent in that sense, but only when used in direct address and regardless of the gender doing the addressing. *Girl* was a token of respect for a woman. The one-syllable word was drawn out to sound like three in recognition of the extra ounce of wit, nerve, or daring that the woman had shown in the situation under discussion.

"G-i-r-l, stop. You mean you said that to his face?"

But if the word was used in a third-person reference or shortened so that it almost snapped out of the mouth, it always involved some element of communal disapproval. And age became an important factor in these exchanges. It was only between individuals of the same generation, or from any older person to a younger (but never the other way around), that *girl* would be considered a compliment.

I don't agree with the argument that use of the word *nigger* at this social stratum of the black community was an internalization of racism. The dynamics were the exact opposite: The people in my grandmother's living room took a word that whites used to signify worthlessness or degradation and rendered it impotent. Gathering there together, they transformed *nigger* to signify the varied and complex human beings they knew themselves to be. If the word was to disappear totally from the mouths of even the most liberal of white society, no one in that room was naive enough to believe it would disappear from white minds. Meeting the word head-on, they proved it had absolutely nothing to do with the way they were determined to live their lives.

So there must have been dozens of times that *nigger* was spoken in front of me before I reached the third grade. But I didn't "hear" it until it was said by a small pair of lips that had already learned it could be a way to humiliate me. That was the word I went home and asked my mother about. And since she knew that I had to grow up in America, she took me in her lap and explained.

### Journal Writing

As Naylor shows, the language of stereotypes can be powerful and painful to encounter. In your journal, recall when you have experienced or witnessed this kind of labeling. What were your reactions? Keep in mind that race is but one object of stereotypes. Consider income, education, body type or other physical attributes, sexual preference, activities, or neighborhood, for just a few other characteristics. (To take your journal writing further, see "From Journal to Essay" on the next page.)

### Questions on Meaning

1. Why does Naylor think that written language is inferior to spoken language (par. 1)?
2. In paragraph 15, Naylor says that although the word *nigger* had been used in her presence many times, she didn't really "hear" the word until a mean little boy said it. How do you explain this contradiction?
3. Naylor says that "the people in my grandmother's living room [. . .] transformed *nigger*" (par. 14). How?
4. What is Naylor's primary PURPOSE in this essay?

### Questions on Writing Strategy

1. In her first two paragraphs, Naylor discusses language in the ABSTRACT. How are these paragraphs connected to her stories about the word *nigger*? Why do you think she begins the essay this way? Is this INTRODUCTION effective or not? Why?
2. Look back at the last two sentences of Naylor's essay. What is the EFFECT of ending on this idea?
3. Go through Naylor's essay and note which paragraphs discuss the racist uses of *nigger* and which discuss the nonracist uses. How do Naylor's organization and the space she devotes to each use help Naylor make her point?
4. OTHER METHODS. After each DEFINITION of the words *nigger* and *girl*, Naylor gives an EXAMPLE in the form of a quotation. These examples are in paragraphs 7–10 (for instance, "Yeah, that old foreman found out quick enough—you don't mess with a nigger" [9]) and paragraph 12 ("G-i-r-l, stop. You mean you said that to his face?"). What do such examples add to Naylor's definitions?



## MARIE WINN

MARIE WINN was born in Czechoslovakia in 1936. As a child she immigrated with her family to New York City, where she attended public school. She graduated from Radcliffe College and went on to Columbia University for further study. She has contributed articles to the *New York Times Magazine*, the *New York Times Book Review*, *Smithsonian*, and the *Wall Street Journal*, where she now writes a column on nature and bird watching. She is also the author of eleven books for both adults and children, including *The Fireside Book of Fun and Game Songs* (1974). Three of her books for adults raise difficult issues of child rearing and have attracted much attention: *The Plug-In Drug: Television, Children, and the Family* (1977, revised 1985), *Children Without Childhood* (1983), and *Unplugging the Plug-In Drug* (1987). Winn's most recent book, *Red-Tails in Love: A Wildlife Drama in Central Park* (1998), tells the story of a pair of red-tailed hawks that nested on a New York high-rise and the community of people who observed them.

## TV Addiction

Do you know someone who can't stop watching television? In this excerpt from *The Plug-In Drug*, Winn defines the troubling malady named in the title. The essay actually performs double duty as a definition, first explaining *addiction*, then *TV addiction*.

The word "addiction" is often used loosely and wryly in conversation. People will refer to themselves as "mystery book addicts" or "cookie addicts." E. B. White<sup>1</sup> writes of his annual surge of interest in gardening: "We are hooked and are making an attempt to kick the habit." Yet nobody really believes that reading mysteries or ordering seeds by catalogue is serious enough to be compared with addictions to heroin or alcohol. The word "addiction" is here used jokingly to denote a tendency to overindulge in some pleasurable activity.

People often refer to being "hooked on TV." Does this, too, fall into the lighthearted category of cookie eating and other pleasures that people pursue with unusual intensity, or is there a kind of television viewing that falls into the more serious category of destructive addiction?

When we think about addiction to drugs or alcohol, we frequently focus on negative aspects, ignoring the pleasures that accompany drinking or drug-

taking. And yet the essence of any serious addiction is a pursuit of pleasure, a search for a "high" that normal life does not supply. It is only the inability to function without the addictive substance that is dismaying, the dependence of the organism upon a certain experience and an increasing inability to function normally without it. Thus a person will take two or three drinks at the end of the day not merely for the pleasure drinking provides, but also because he "doesn't feel normal" without them.

An addict does not merely pursue a pleasurable experience and need to experience it in order to function normally. He needs to *repeat* it again and again. Something about that particular experience makes life without it less than complete. Other potentially pleasurable experiences are no longer possible, for under the spell of the addictive experience, his life is peculiarly distorted. The addict craves an experience and yet he is never really satisfied. The organism may be temporarily sated, but soon it begins to crave again.

Finally, a serious addiction is distinguished from a harmless pursuit of pleasure by its distinctly destructive elements. A heroin addict, for instance, leads a damaged life: His increasing need for heroin in increasing doses prevents him from working, from maintaining relationships, from developing in human ways. Similarly an alcoholic's life is narrowed and dehumanized by his dependence on alcohol.

Let us consider television viewing in the light of the conditions that define serious addictions.

Not unlike drugs or alcohol, the television experience allows the participant to blot out the real world and enter into a pleasurable and passive mental state. The worries and anxieties of reality are as effectively deferred by becoming absorbed in a television program as by going on a "trip" induced by drugs or alcohol. And just as alcoholics are only inchoately aware of their addiction, feeling that they control their drinking more than they really do ("I can cut it out any time I want—I just like to have three or four drinks before dinner"), people similarly overestimate their control over television watching. Even as they put off other activities to spend hour after hour watching television, they feel they could easily resume living in a different, less passive style. But somehow or other while the television set is present in their homes, the click doesn't sound. With television pleasures available, those other experiences seem less attractive, more difficult somehow.

A heavy viewer (a college English instructor) observes: "I find television almost irresistible. When the set is on, I cannot ignore it. I can't turn it off. I feel sapped, will-less, enervated. As I reach out to turn off the set, the strength goes out of my arms. So I sit there for hours and hours."

The self-confessed television addict often feels he "ought" to do other

<sup>1</sup> See page 494.—EDS.



things—but the fact that he doesn't read and doesn't plant his garden or sew or crochet or play games or have conversations means that those activities are no longer as desirable as television viewing. In a way a heavy viewer's life is as imbalanced by his television "habit" as a drug addict's or an alcoholic's. He is living in a holding pattern, as it were, passing up the activities that lead to growth or development or a sense of accomplishment. This is one reason people talk about their television viewing so ruefully, so apologetically. They are aware that it is an unproductive experience, that almost any other endeavor is more worthwhile by any human measure.

Finally, it is the adverse effect of television viewing on the lives of so many people that defines it as a serious addiction. The television habit distorts the sense of time. It renders other experiences vague and curiously unreal while taking on a greater reality for itself. It weakens relationships by reducing and sometimes eliminating normal opportunities for talking, for communicating.

And yet television does not satisfy, else why would the viewer continue to watch hour after hour, day after day? "The measure of health," writes Lawrence Kubie, "is flexibility . . . and especially the freedom to cease when sated." But the television viewer can never be sated with his television experiences—they do not provide the true nourishment that satiation requires—and thus he finds that he cannot stop watching.

### Journal Writing

If you like to watch television, Winn's essay may seem exaggerated. After all, isn't turning on the TV a great way to unwind or to be entertained? In your journal, write about your own relationship to television. How often do you watch? Does TV viewing interfere with your life, or do you have it under control? What does TV viewing do for (or to) your life? If you don't watch TV at all, write instead about why you don't. (To take your journal writing further, see "From Journal to Essay" on the facing page.)

### Questions on Meaning

1. What distinction does Winn make between the "harmless pursuit of pleasure" and addiction?
2. In paragraph 2 Winn poses the question that leads to her THESIS. What is the answer to this question? Do you find it explicitly stated anywhere?
3. What does Winn think are the main problems caused by excessive TV viewing?
4. Does Winn think there can be anything good about watching television? How do you know?

### Questions on Writing Strategy

1. Why does Winn take such care to define *addiction* (pars. 3–5)? What does this stipulative definition do for the essay?
2. Winn does not answer her thesis question immediately after she asks it (par. 2). Why, do you think? What is the EFFECT of this delay?
3. Throughout her essay, Winn puts a number of words and phrases in quotation marks—for example, "hooked on TV" (par. 2), "high" (3), "trip" (7), "ought" (9). What does this punctuation contribute to Winn's essay?
4. **OTHER METHODS.** Study Winn's COMPARISON between drug or alcohol addiction and TV addiction. How are the two similar? Are they different in any way?

### Questions on Language

1. Especially in paragraphs 4 and 11, Winn uses several metaphors of eating to explain addiction. (See *Figures of speech* in Useful Terms if you need a definition of *metaphor*.) If you do not know the meanings of *craves*, *sated*, *nourishment*, and *satiated*, look them up in a dictionary. What is the effect of using such terms to define addiction?
2. What does Winn mean when she describes addiction as "living in a holding pattern" (par. 9)?
3. Consult a dictionary if you don't know the meanings of any of the following words: wryly, denote (par. 1); dismaying, organism (3); dehumanized (5); inchoately (7); sapped, enervated (8); ruefully, apologetically, endeavor (9); adverse, renders, vague (10).

### Suggestions for Writing

1. **FROM JOURNAL TO ESSAY.** If you are a TV watcher, write an essay that compares and contrasts your relationship with TV and Winn's definition of TV *addiction*: Would Winn consider you a television addict? Do you consider yourself one? Is it possible to watch a lot of television without being an addict? If you are not a TV watcher (or not much of one), write an essay that compares and contrasts your life with that of a frequent watcher (not necessarily an addict): How do you benefit? What might you be missing?
2. As Winn's opening paragraph points out, people often claim to be "addicted" to all kinds of things. From your experience, you probably know that such addictions can include everything from spy novels to Snickers candy bars to driving dangerously. Write an essay defining an addiction (but not to cigarettes, drugs, alcohol, or television). Your essay's TONE may be serious or humorous, but you should give your readers a sense of the addiction's CAUSES AND EFFECTS as well as EXAMPLES of its sufferers.
3. **CRITICAL WRITING.** "Finally, it is the adverse effect of television viewing on the lives of so many people that defines it as a serious addiction" (par. 10). Do you agree with this statement? Does the number of people affected define an addiction as "serious"? If fewer people suffered the "adverse effect" of TV viewing,

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## ADDITIONAL WRITING TOPICS

### *Definition*

1. Write an essay in which you define an institution, trend, phenomenon, or abstraction as specifically and concretely as possible. Following are some suggestions designed to stimulate ideas. Before you begin, limit your subject.

Responsibility  
Fun  
Sorrow  
Unethical behavior  
The environment  
Education  
Progress  
Advertising  
Happiness  
Fads  
Feminism  
Marriage  
Sportsmanship  
Leadership  
Leisure  
Originality  
Character  
Imagination  
Democracy  
A smile  
A classic (of music, literature, art, or film)  
Dieting  
Meditation  
Friendship

2. In a brief essay, define one of the following. In each instance, you have a choice of something good or something bad to talk about.

A good or bad boss  
A good or bad parent  
A good or bad host  
A good or bad TV newscaster  
A good or bad physician  
A good or bad nurse  
A good or bad minister, priest, or rabbi  
A good or bad roommate  
A good or bad driver  
A good or bad disk jockey